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Over the past decade Damascus and Tehran have developed a strong working relationship based on cooperation on issues related to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel. Looming differences over Lebanon and international terrorism, however, pose a serious challenge to the relationship. 63

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Near East and
South Asia Review
Article

The Syrian-Iranian Entente:
Will It Last? b3

Syria and Iran have established a strong working relationship based on their mutual interest in cooperating on issues related to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel, but there is a strong undercurrent of political strain that threatens to stall or set back relations. The recent decisions by Lebanese legislators on national reconciliation in Lebanon and differing perspectives on radical Palestinian and Islamic activism are bringing to the surface long-dormant differences between Damascus and Tehran over Lebanon's political future and international terrorism. Both capitals will work to paper over the differences. Each is the other's only close ally, and they want to avoid a rupture in bilateral ties. Nevertheless, in our view, the relationship will exhibit more strains in the near term. b3

Reaffirming Ties

Since the cease-fire in July 1988 that ended the shooting war between Iran and Iraq, Damascus and Tehran have taken steps to strengthen their ties. Iran's defeat and Iraq's growing involvement in Lebanon served to encourage warmer relations. Syrian and Iranian officials exchange visits nearly every month and discuss a wide range of diplomatic and economic issues. Damascus announced in May and repeated in September that Syrian President Assad would "soon" pay his first visit to Tehran. b3

What Each Side Wants in the Relationship

Political Cooperation. Two primary issues drive the Damascus-Tehran relationship. One - Iraq - reflects the long-standing animosities harbored by both regimes toward Baghdad as well as newfound concerns about Iraq's emergence from the war as a major regional military and economic threat. Iran and Syria almost certainly share a renewed sense of urgency about thwarting Iraqi President Saddam Husayn's ambitions for regional leadership. Moreover, Saddam is unlikely to forgive Assad's

siding with his Persian enemy during the war, and Baghdad has vowed vengeance against Damascus. b3

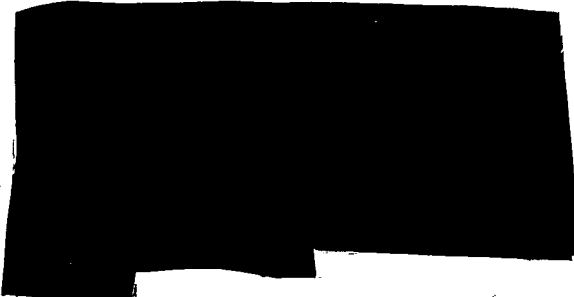
Damascus and Tehran also share common interests in Lebanon. Both have sought to end the perennial fighting there between rival Shia militias - the pro-Syrian Amal and pro-Iranian Hizballah. The Syrians need Iran's help in pacifying Hizballah and in providing financial and logistic support to their allies in Lebanon. The Iranians depend on Syria for access to Lebanon to provide support to Hizballah and radical Palestinian and Lebanese Muslim groups, as well as to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard contingent in Lebanon. Both have sought to reconcile the two Shia factions as part of a common effort to consolidate the Lebanese Shia community. Damascus has also acquiesced to the front of Lebanese Muslim fundamentalists and radical Palestinian factions created by Tehran last year to challenge PLO chief Yasir Arafat. Both Damascus and Tehran would like to see the front arrayed against Israel and Lebanese Christian leader Michel Awn, who has received support from Iraq and vows to liberate Lebanese territory under Syrian control. b3

Syria and Iran view each other as the only other regime in the region determined to strongly oppose Israel. Shia shrines in Syria provide Tehran with a convenient location to place Iranian and pro-Iranian Shia extremists determined to export the revolution to the Arab Gulf states. b3

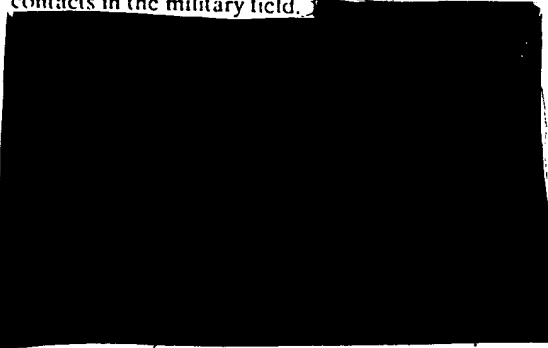
Both countries act as a communication channel for the other. The Syrians, for example, occasionally use their links to Tehran to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia. b3

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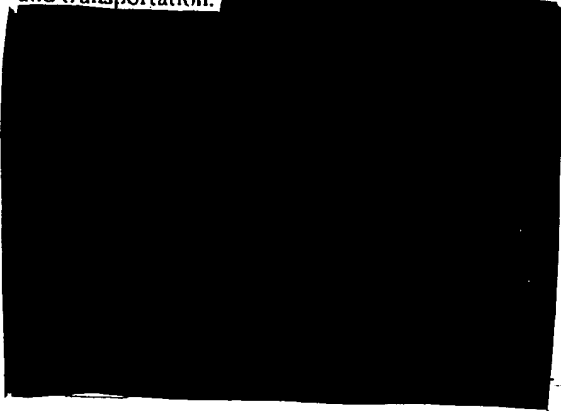


Military Support. Syria and Iran have expanded contacts in the military field.




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Economic Aid. Both countries are discussing economic cooperation in a variety of fields, such as oil and industrial production, agriculture, construction, and transportation.





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Doubts and Misgivings


Despite the many cooperative aspects of Syrian-Iranian ties,  lingering distrust

Syrian-Iranian Relations: A Retrospective

The advent of Ayatollah Khomeini's rule in Iran a decade ago reshaped Syrian-Iranian relations. The Shah's monarchy and conservative, pro-Western foreign policy had stood in sharp contrast to the leftist, Pan-Arab, and pro-Soviet stance of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. Like other radical Arab leaders, Assad viewed the Iranian revolution as a positive development. He saw Iran's turn from the United States as a boost to Syria's struggle to rid the region of Western political and military influence and to strengthen the coalition of regional states opposed to Israel. For the Iranians, Syria constituted a natural ally in their bid to restrain Iraq and expand access to Lebanon.  b3

Two mutually reinforcing trends cemented Iranian-Syrian ties — the deterioration in relations between Syria and Iraq at the turn of the decade and the onset of Iran's war with Iraq. Assad, in casting his lot with Iran and incurring the hostility of most other Arabs, hoped an Iraqi defeat would return Arab attention to the Arab-Israeli dispute and settle Syria's competition with Iraq for leadership of the Ba'ath movement and the Arab world. Iran saw Syria as a strategic ally against Iraq and as a wedge to divide Arabs. Inherent differences stemming from Iran's Islamic fundamentalism and Syria's secularism were counterbalanced by shared religious and social experiences. The Shia faith of Iran's clergy and the Alawi sect to which Syria's ruling elite adheres have similarities in doctrine. Moreover, both groups were political outcasts before seizing power.  b3

clouds the relationship. In some areas of cooperation the two sides clearly are unwilling to abide by the spirit of the alliance. For example, Iran's final shipment of free oil to Syria under the 1988 contract was delayed nearly five months. For its part, Syria periodically holds up the transfer through Damascus airport of supplies destined for Iran's Revolutionary Guard contingent in Lebanon. 

 the intensity of bilateral contacts earlier this year was attributable in part to each side's concern about the other's intentions. Several Iranian

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diplomatic initiatives almost certainly have heightened Syrian concerns about Tehran's reliability as a partner. These include:

- Iran's bid for a role in the Arab-Israeli dispute by trying to orchestrate a new anti-Arafat alliance of radical Palestinians and Lebanese Islamic fundamentalists, perhaps at Syria's expense.
- Iran's interest in expanding ties to the Lebanese Amal and Druze militias.

The Syrians, for their part, have acted in ways that disturb the Iranians. For example, Damascus supported a pro-Iraqi resolution on resolving the Iran-Iraq conflict at the Arab League summit meeting in Morocco last May to gain support for Syria's policies in Lebanon. b3

Divorce Over Lebanon?

b3 [redacted] the greatest challenge to the Syrian-Iranian relationship appears to be looming differences over Lebanon, which threaten to undo the progress in bilateral relations achieved to date. As long as prospects for peace in that country appeared remote, Damascus and Tehran could defer the issue of their contradictory political goals and concentrate on strengthening Lebanese groups opposed to Israel and Western interests. The political breakthrough achieved by Lebanese legislators at their meeting under Arab League auspices in Ta'if this fall, however, is forcing Syria and Iran to confront their differences. Lebanon's national reconciliation pact generally supports Syria's longstanding objectives for that country - modification of the political system to allow greater Muslim power and a secular government dedicated to promoting a nonconfessional civil service. Syria's Amal allies generally support these objectives but would go further in giving majority rule to the Shia population - the largest Lebanese sect - that Amal represents along with Hizballah. Iran backs Hizballah's position that the Shias have the right to dominate the country politically because of their numerical strength and desire to establish clerical rule. b3

Syria strongly supports - and Iran just as strongly opposes - the reconciliation pact concluded in Ta'if. Neither side has criticized the other's position publicly, but the agreement has soured the relationship. b1 b3 [redacted]

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Outlook: No Second Honeymoon

[redacted] Syria and Iran will work to avoid a rupture over Lebanon or other issues. Although Iran wants to scuttle the Ta'if accord, concern about the need to preserve its presence in Lebanon and maintain pressure on Iraq will probably cause Tehran to stop short of a break with the Syrians. b1 b3

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increasingly difficult to mask their differences if political reform gains momentum. Either side could misstep on Lebanon and inadvertently provoke a crisis in the relationship:

- Tehran probably sees an opportunity to strengthen its alliance with Lebanese Muslims who are unhappy with the Lebanese Christians and with Syria's acquiescence in the reform plan. Tehran will not openly confront Damascus over the issue of political succession in Lebanon, but it is likely to encourage Hizballah opposition and may even support terrorism against Lebanese leaders to disrupt implementation of the agreement.
- Assad will tolerate Iranian and Lebanese Muslim criticism of the reform plan and the new Lebanese government, but he almost certainly will not permit Iran to sabotage them, even if he must risk a showdown with Tehran.

Overall, the Syrian-Iranian relationship probably will continue as little more than a marriage of convenience. ~~the~~ the two regimes will find it difficult to strengthen — let alone maintain — the alliance over time. The outlook for economic and military cooperation, in particular, is dismal because of the financial constraints facing both countries. Tehran probably views aid as a tangible way of

controlling its relations with Damascus and influencing policy, but Iran is strapped for cash and probably will not be able to offer Syria much in the way of financial support. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states can make more substantial bids for Syria's attention than Iran. Political and intelligence cooperation will prove less problematical, but ~~the~~ differences between Syria and Iran over Lebanon will heighten the suspicions that have bedeviled the relationship during the past decade.

Implications for the United States

Syrian-Iranian cooperation poses a threat to US interests, especially if the two countries decide to sponsor terrorist operations outside Israel and Lebanon. Joint sponsorship of radical Palestinian cross-border attacks against Israel also could disrupt the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Lebanon is part of a US, Saudi, and even Syrian conspiracy to root Iran out of Lebanon. Although the Syrians would like to see the US hostage crisis in Lebanon resolved, they almost certainly fear — ~~that~~ that any Iranian deal with Washington would come at Damascus's expense.